

# Student Threat Assessments: Back to the Basics

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# Conflict of Interest Statement

- ◉ I do consultations and workshops for...
  - > Confidential corporate clients
  - > State and federal agencies
  - > Private law firms
- ◉ Association of Threat Assessment Professionals (ATAP)
- ◉ American Society of Trial Consultants (ASTC)
- ◉ American Psychological Association, Psychology and the Law Society (Div 41)
- ◉ I have no current affiliations with any pharmaceutical companies

# Disclosure About Content

- The “F” word will be used a few times during the course of the lecture
- An audio recording will be played of an individual who just committed an act of targeted violence, and just before he commits suicide

# School Violence Increase

- School violence continues to be a major challenge for schools in the United States, and throughout the world.
- Fueled in part by the stress created from the recent global economic downturn, there has been a rise in school violence over the last few years in the United States, England, Canada, Australia, South Africa, Poland, France, and many more.
- Even in countries that have traditionally shown low levels of school violence, such as Japan, have reported record numbers of violent incidents.

# Duty to foresee, forewarn, and protect against violent behavior

- ◎ The pressure is on for schools to be more diligent than ever in identifying students who pose an immediate or potential threat of violence to the school community.
- ◎ A Tort is a wrong committed by someone who owes a legal duty of care to another and breaches that duty
- ◎ Universal Duty of Care-Every person owes a duty to every other person to exercise ordinary care in his activities to prevent foreseeable injury (Aerie No. 3738, Inc. v Claywell, 1987)

# Duty to foresee, forewarn, and protect against violent behavior (Cont)

- “America is unsurpassed as the most litigious culture in the history of human kind...It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the principles of tort liability are being vigorously applied in lawsuits that have been filed in the wake of the epidemic of secondary school shooting.” (Michael Breen, JD, Plaintiff Attorney)
- “In a country that has been traumatized by the (Perceived) epidemic of school shootings, a jury will have no trouble punishing those who dismiss adolescent threats as incredible.” (Michael Breen, JD, Plaintiff Attorney)



# The Importance Of Establishing Clear Policies And Procedures

- It is important to have specific, well articulated procedures for exploring allegations of actual or potential violence
  - > ANY student that the school deems as meeting the behavioral guidelines of **DEFINED BEHAVIORS** (Red Flags) is subject to undergoing a “Focused Threat Assessment” at the discretion of the school.



# Zero-Tolerance Policies

- ◉ Originally developed for drug enforcement
- ◉ Assumes that removing students to engage in disruptive behaviors will deter other students from engaging in similar behaviors (Ewing, 2000)
- ◉ Different schools have different definitions of what “zero tolerance” means
- ◉ There’s a big question mark as to their effectiveness
  - APA Article- “Are zero-Tolerance Policies Effective in our Schools” (American Psychologist, 2008)



# Zero-Tolerance Policies

- “An extensive review of the literature found that, despite a 20-year history of implementation, there are surprisingly few data that could directly test the assumptions of a zero tolerance approach to school discipline, and the data that are available tend to contradict those assumptions. Moreover, zero tolerance policies may negatively affect the relationship of education with juvenile justice and appear to conflict to some degree with current best knowledge concerning adolescent development.”
- **But the biggest problem from a threat assessment perspective-people do not want to come forward with information if they feel they are going to be responsible for someone being kicked out of school**
- They will say it was not that big of a deal and not worth someone being expelled for

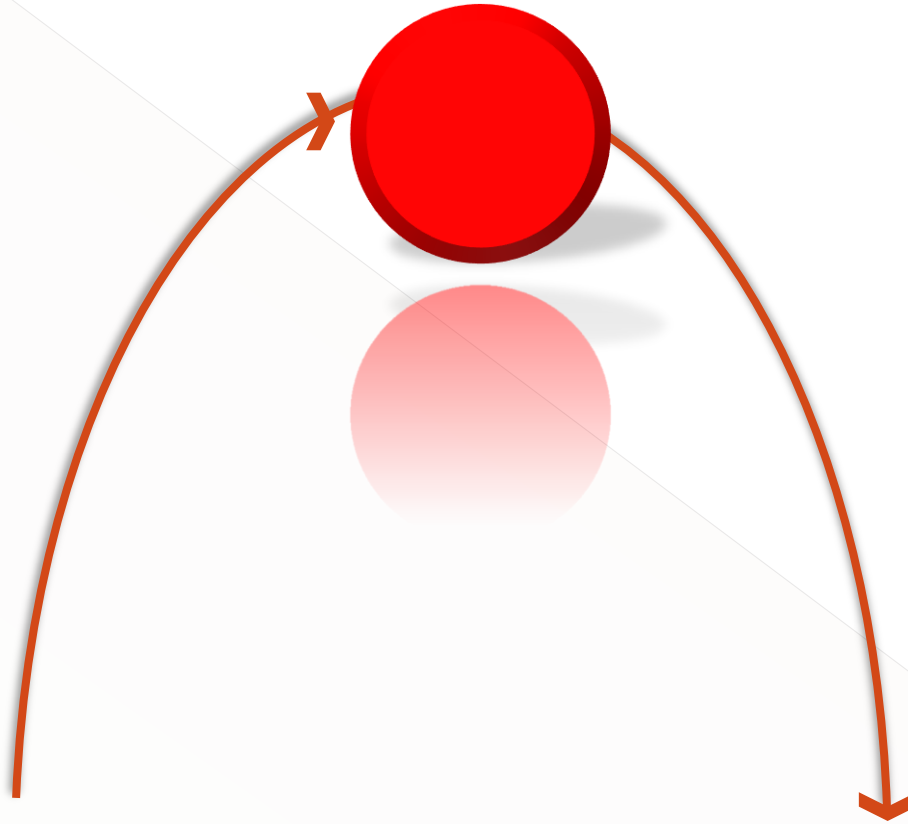
# Central Reporting of Potential Red Flag Behaviors

- ◉ **CENTRAL REPORTING-** IDENTIFY AND PUT IN PLACE SOMEONE THAT ALL REPORTS GOES TO (**LINKING**)
  - > **The three blind men and the elephant**
  - > In almost all cases **the shooter told someone** or gave information to someone, which if it had been known, might have stopped the incident
  - > School resource officer is best positioned
  - > If no SRO, then school counselor should be considered
  - > **LINKING SOFTWARE** – Central database for ALL reported behaviors with weight put on Red Flags (Within school or Within State)

# Circles Vs. Ovals

- Pavlov- A dog was trained to salivate at the sight of a circle. But he was also trained to stop salivating when a long oval was on display.
- School officials and threat assessment teams need to know when to refer to an outside consultant
- There is a tremendous amount of data out there, some are credible, some are not
- You identified the risk- You did your job
- A risk assessment is not the same as a psychological assessment (DON'T Send TO MH Professional)
- A different set of Assessment Skills Are Needed
- Know your consultants qualifications before referring to them
- **DUE DILIGENCE**

# “Ball In The Air Scenario” Is Behavior Increasing or Decreasing?



# When to use an outside consultant Must have a Decision Tree

- In-House resource: i.e. School counselor, School Psychologist, MH Professional
- What is the Tipping Point?
- Outside consultant- Threat/Dangerous Assessment Expert

# Types of School Violence

- ◉ Gang Related
- ◉ Drug Related
- ◉ Intimate Relationship Related (Jealousy, Envy)
- ◉ Off Campus Crime Spill Over
- ◉ Bullying
- ◉ Outside adults shooting students
- ◉ Targeted School Violence (Rampage Shooters)

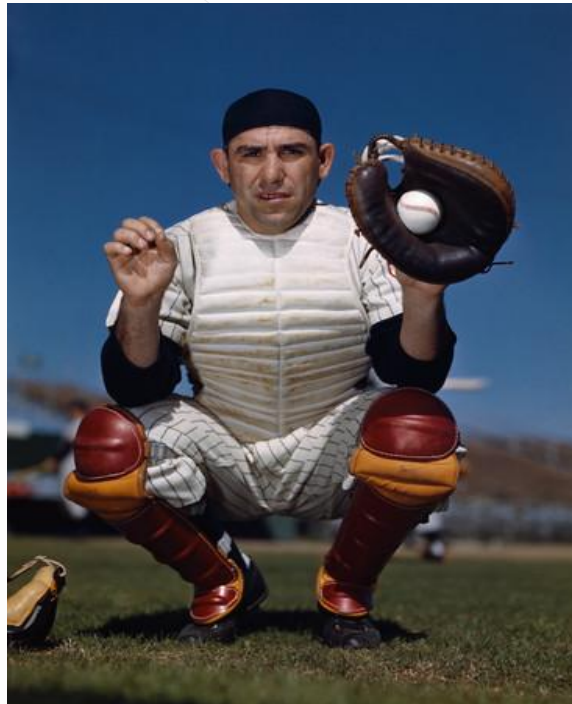
# Brief History of School Violence

- ◉ WORST CASE OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE IN THE USA
  - > 1927, Bath Maine, Andrew Kehoe murdered his wife and then used dynamite to blow up the school. 45 people dead and 58 wounded, mostly children
- ◉ WORST CASE OF TARGETED SCHOOL VIOLENCE
  - > **Cho Seung-Hui, 23-year old Virginia Tech**



# School Threat Assessment Teams Pitfalls To Be Aware Of

- “We're lost, but we're making good time”-Yogi Berra

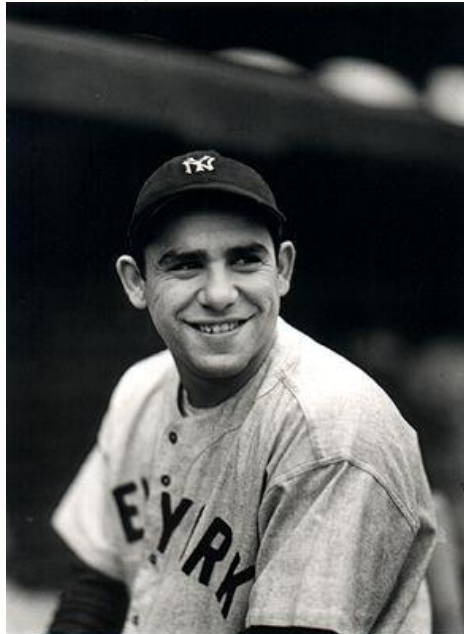


# School Threat Assessment Teams-pitfalls To Be Aware Of

- **Group Polarization-** the tendency of people to make decisions that are more extreme when they are in a group, as opposed to a decision made alone or independently
- **Groupthink-** a type of thought exhibited by group members who try to minimize conflict, reach consensus, and promote harmony of the group
- **Confirmation Bias-** a tendency for people to favor information that confirms their preconceptions and beliefs
- **Territorial Posturing and Egos-** Some people don't play/work well together

# Targeted School Violence Threat Assessment

- “It's tough to make predictions, especially about the future”-Yogi Berra



# NO PRESSURE- But why it is important to get this right

- ◉ **False negatives-** Dangerous Students inaccurately identified as Non-Dangerous
- ◉ **False positives-** Non-Dangerous Students inaccurately identified as Dangerous

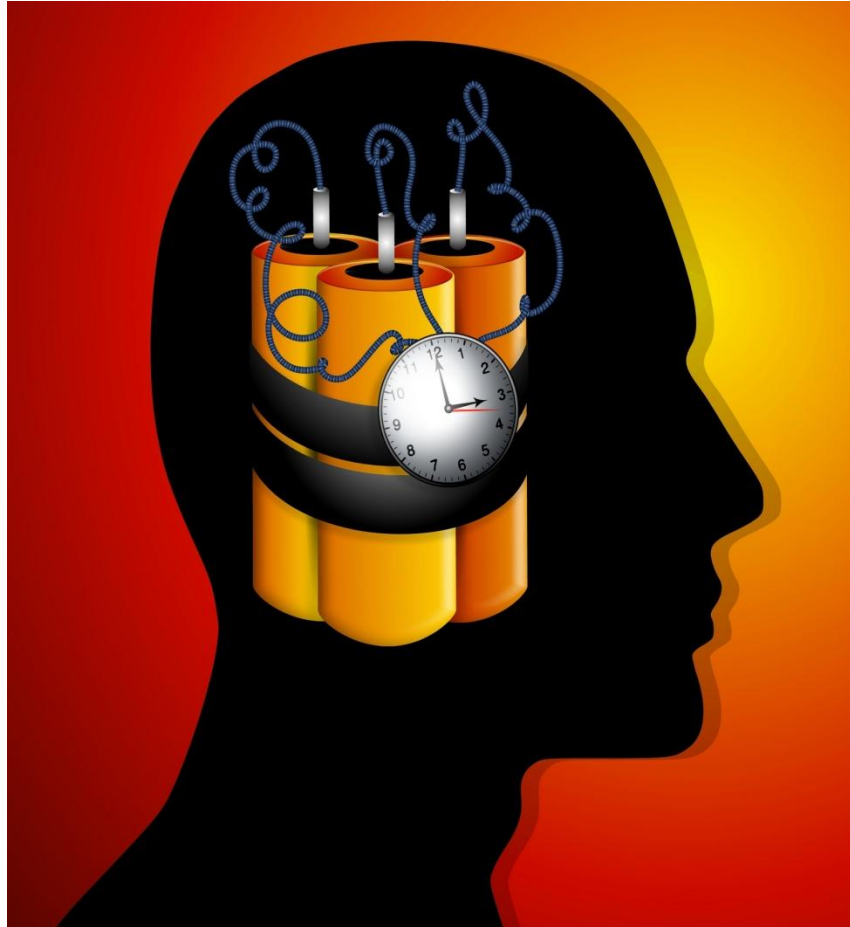
# Profiling Vs. Red Flags

- It is important to distinguish between the concept of a profile versus individuals who have multiple thoughts and behaviorally-based red flags.
- Most "profiles" tend to be demographic in nature (race, religion, social economic status). Individuals who commit school and workplace violence are extremely heterogeneous when it comes to demographic data, HOWEVER, they share many thoughts and behavioral patterns.

# The Goal Of The Student Threat Assessment

- ◉ Keep in mind that the progression of most actions proceeds in the following manner:
- ◉ Thoughts → words → Plans → Actions
  - Incidents of targeted violence at school are rarely impulsive
- ◉ **THE GOAL IS TO INTERVENE BEFORE THE ACTIONS.**

# Research findings on students who commit Targeted School Violence



- **The three red flags with the greatest predictive weight are:**
  1. History of being bullied/victimized (real or perceived)
  2. Suicidal Ideation and/or attempts
  3. Interest in and access to firearms/weapons



# Impact of Bullying on Mental Health



- ◉ Depression
- ◉ Anxiety
- ◉ Low Self-Esteem
- ◉ Poor Self-Image
- ◉ PTSD
- ◉ Suicidal Ideations
- ◉ Truancy
- ◉ Drug Use
- ◉ Anger
- ◉ Rage

# Defining Bullying Behaviors (Langman)

- The bully has more power than the victim. This could be through larger size, greater strength, superior confidence, or force of numbers
- Bullying involves physical abuse or intimidation through threats. The victims are made to fear for their safety. This means that being teased about one's cloths is not bullying
- Bullying involves a pattern of behavior. Being pushed one time does not constitute a pattern of physical harassment
- **SO IS THERE SUCH A THING AS SOCIAL BULLYING?**

# Bullying Relationship

## Relationship To Bullying/Victimization

- > Cited in almost all known “Rampage” shootings
- > Real or perceived-Same result



## Cho Seung-Hui, 23-year old Virginia Tech gunman, Killed 33 people on campus, including himself.

- > "You have vandalized my heart, raped my soul and torched my conscience. You thought it was one pathetic boy's life you were extinguishing. Thanks to you, I die like Jesus Christ to inspire generations of the weak and the defenseless people." "
- > Your Mercedes wasn't enough, you brats. Your golden necklaces weren't enough, you snobs. Your trust funds wasn't enough. Your vodka and cognac wasn't enough. All your debaucheries weren't enough. Those weren't enough to fulfill your hedonistic needs. You had everything."

# Bullying/victimization (Cont)

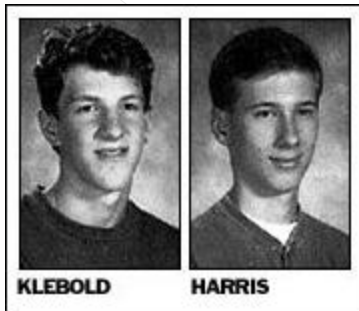
- ◉ **ALL** Rampage Killers Feel Justified in their actions. If the People they Kill are not Monsters, **THEN** They Are, and **NOBODY** Wants to Feel Like or Be Remembered as a Monster
- ◉ **Vigilante Justice**- writing a perceived wrong, not just for themselves but for everyone who's been a victim. A REAL MAN STEPS UP AND TAKES CARE OF BUSINESS,

# Bullying/victimization (Cont)



- ◉ **Luke Woodham**, 16 year old, Pearl, Mississippi, killed his ex-girlfriend and her best friend and injured seven others in the 1997 school shooting (Also killed his mother prior to the shooting, while she was sleeping).
  - > "I do this on behalf of all kids who have been mistreated."
  - > I am not insane, I am angry. I killed because people like me are mistreated every day. I did this to show society, push us and we will push back. ... All throughout my life, I was ridiculed, always beaten, always hated. Can you, society, truly blame me for what I do? Yes, you will. ... It was not a cry for attention, it was not a cry for help. It was a scream in sheer agony saying that if you can't pry your eyes open, if I can't do it through pacifism, if I can't show you through the displaying of intelligence, then I will do it with a bullet.

# Bullying/victimization (Cont)



- ◉ **Eric Harris**, 17 year old, who along with 18 year old **Dylan Klebold**, killed 15 people, at Columbine High School, including themselves, and injured 24 others
  - > “Everyone is always making fun of me because of how I look how fucking weak I am...then again, I have always hated how I look, I make fun of people who look like me, sometimes without even thinking, sometimes just because I want to rip him myself. That’s where a lot of my feet gross from. The fact that I have practically no self-esteem, especially concerning girls and looks in such.”
  - > “Your children who have ridiculed me, who have chosen not to accept me, who have treated me like I am not worth their time are dead....”



# Why Cyber Bullying Is Becoming An Increasing Problem

- ◉ **Digital natives vs. digital immigrants** (Mark Prensky)
  - > Must think like a native by enlisting a native (Allow learning to be a two-way street-have students teach an in-service on cyber life and cyber bullying in their SPECIFIC community)
- ◉ **Much of social life for children/students is increasingly defined by social networking and websites**
  - > Cyber bullying is simply an extension of this-as Internet social networking rises, cyber bullying can be expected to increase also (sexting also)
- ◉ **“Zerg”-gang up on someone**
- ◉ **“Zerg” kids on game sites- a form of bullying. Intentionally ruin the game experience for the victim**
- ◉ Large percentage of children will not report cyber bullying for fear of having their computer taken away
- ◉ 33% of students have private computers
- ◉ 63% of students claim they regularly hide Internet activity from parents
- ◉ 43% of students report minimizing their use around family
- ◉ 35% clear browser history regularly after use (Red Flag if history is always clear)
- ◉ 20% of four to sixth-graders give out their real names, addresses, and phone numbers over the Internet
- ◉ 93% OF PARENTS REPORT THEY ARE CONFIDENT THEY KNOW WHAT THEIR KIDS ARE DOING





# Depression with Suicidal Thoughts



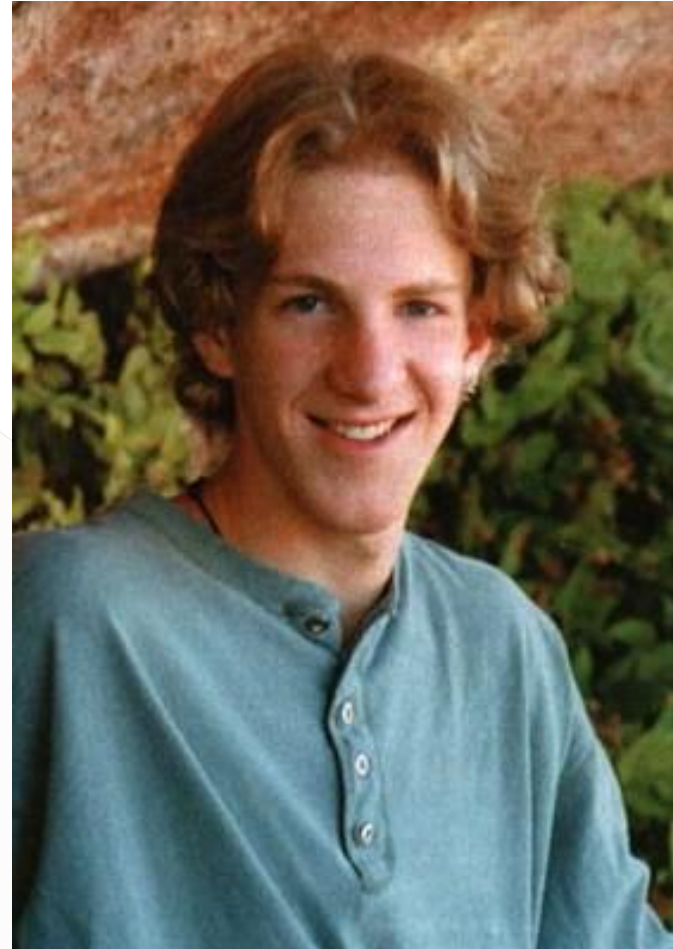
- ◉ **“BEWARE THE MAN WITH NOTHING TO LOSE”**  
(Buddhist proverb)
- ◉ **80%** of targeted school shooters intend on suiciding, but only about a third actually follow through
- ◉ Internal versus external **“locus of control”**

# Depression With Suicidal Thoughts (Cont)


- ◉ **Evan Ramsey**, age 16, Bethel Alaska, killed one student and his principal. Put a gun under his chin but could not pull the trigger. Begged authorities to kill him
- ◉ **Michael Carneal**, age 14, West Paducah, Kentucky, killed three girls. Yelled for someone to kill him
- ◉ **Andrew Worst**, age 14, Edinboro, Pennsylvania, shot and killed the teacher and wounded another teacher and two students. Leftist suicide note before he left his house
- ◉ **Kip Kinkel**, age 15, Springfield, Oregon, killed his parents, and the next day he went to school killed two students, wounded 25. He was tackled before he could kill himself and yelled for someone to kill him
- ◉ **Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold**, ages 18 and 17, Columbine high school, killed 12 students and one teacher, both committed suicide at the school
- ◉ **Jeffrey Weise**, age 16, Red Lake Minnesota, killed his grandfather and his grandfather's girlfriend, then drove to school and killed a security guard, a teacher, and five students, then killed himself
- ◉ **Seung Hui Cho**, age 23, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, killed 32 people, wounded 17, and then killed himself

# Depression with suicidal thoughts (Cont)

- “I am in eternal suffering, in infinite directions in infinite realities.”
- **“Oooh God I want to die so bad...** such a sad desolate lonely unsalvageable I feel I am... not fair, not fair!!! Let’s sum up my life... the most miserable existence in the history of time.”



# Interest In And Access To Firearms/Weapons



I will not bring weapons to school.  
I will not bring weapons to school.  
I will not bring weapons to school.  
I will not bring weapons to school.  
I will not bring weapons to school.

- **Most attackers had previously used guns and had access to them**
- Andrew Golden, age 11 Jonesboro, Arkansas
- 1998, carried out a sniper attack, killed four girls and a teacher
- Given a rifle for his 6<sup>th</sup> birthday

# WHEN IT ALL COMES TOGETHER

## Omar Thornton



# Threatening students vs. students who are a threat

- ◉ The central question in a threat assessment investigation is whether a student poses a threat, **NOT** whether the student has made a threat
- ◉ Some students will look threatening but pose no threat
- ◉ some students who are considered “model students” might pose a significant threat
- ◉ Victor and Paul, **F-U-C-K L-I-F-E**



# Types of threats

- ◉ **DIRECT THREAT-** Identifies a specific act against a specific target and is delivered in a straightforward, clear, and explicit manner
- ◉ **INDIRECT THREAT-** Tends to be vague, unclear, ambiguous. violence is implied, but the threat is phrased tentatively and suggest that a violent act could occur, not that it will occur
- ◉ **VEILED THREAT-** strongly implies but does not explicitly threaten violence
- ◉ **CONDITIONAL THREAT-** is often seen in extortion cases. It warns that a violent act will happen unless certain demands were terms are made



# Types Of Data

- **Psychological Risk Factors** typically include but are not limited to: suicidal thoughts, homicidal thoughts, persecutory thoughts, substance abuse, poor reality testing (e.g., delusional thinking).
- **Static (Historical) Risk Factors** typically include but are not limited to: history of verbal and/or written reprimands for inappropriate, unusual, or bizarre behaviors, history of bringing inappropriate items to school such as those that can be used to intimidate or threaten, history of violent behavior in or out of school, such as making threats to teachers or fellow students, history of domestic violence, history (beginning in childhood) of being bullied or being a bully, history of hospitalizations for mental health issues (specifically suicide attempts or thought disorders).
- **Environmental (Situational) Risk Factors** typically include factors that increases an individual's level of stress beyond what is normal for that individual and include but is not limited to: recent history of personal loss, such as the death of a close family member, recent or impending divorce, foreclosure or impending foreclosure of a home, absence of familial or community support.
- **Unpredictable/Random Factors (Hit by a bus intervention)**
- **Protective factors- actors that way in the direction of preventing an individual from committing and at the violence, i.e.concrete plans for the future**
- **In All Threat Assessments There Are-** Things you know, Things you don't know BUT you can find out, and things you can not possible know
- Risk is always **Low, Moderate, High, NEVER No Risk, Never Immanent Risk.** WHY? Because of dynamic factors than cannot be predicted

# Interviewing Students

- > The major points for interviewing students that are essential to uncovering real threats (Looking past the presenting behavior)

# Bridging

- ◉ “No one cares what you know, they want to know that you care” (Zig Zigler)
  - Tactics for “bridging” with the student and establishing the rapport crucial to attaining data
  - Anything can be used to bridge-music, sports, art, cars, motorcycles, neighborhoods, etc.

# Interviewing Parents

- ◉ Parents probably know more than they think they do
- ◉ **DEMOGRAPHIC DATA**
  - > Be specific-take nothing for granted
  - > If an immigrant-talk about transition to America

# Interviewing Parents (Cont)

## ◎ **RELATIONSHIP WITH PARENTS**

- > What family member are closest to?
- > When was the last fight or argument with the parents? Which one? What was it about?
- > How often do you do activities as a family?
- > When was the last time you did activities as a family? What was it? Where was it? What was his reaction to the time spent?
- > Which parent is he closer to?
- > How do you discipline him?
- > What has he expressed as his biggest disappointment in his life so far?
- > What has he expressed as his biggest success/accomplishment in his life so far?
- > How does he typically/handle/manage disappointments in his life? (Internal versus external blame)

# Interviewing Parents (Cont)

## ◉ **HOBBIES/SOCIAL/INTERNET USE**

- > What does he spend most of his time doing?
- > What kind of video games does he watch?
- > Where does he watch them?
- > Who buys them?
- > How much time does he spend a week on average watching video games?
- > Internet accounts? Which ones do you know about? How are they monitored?
- > E mail accounts and blogs? Again, how are they monitored?
- > How much time does he spend per week on average on the Internet?
- > Does he have a cell phone/texting device? Is it monitored? How is it monitored? Who pays for it?
- > How many texts does he send on average per week?
- > Reading materials including magazines/books/internet news, etc?
- > Music? Favorite? What song? How does he have access to buying music? Who buys it for him?
- > When was the last time you all listened to music together?



# Interviewing Parents (Cont)

## ◎ FRIENDS

- > Who is his best friend?
- > What is his longest friendship that they know of?
- > As a child when did he start playdates?
- > How did they normally go? Were there any issues of aggression?
- > Who was his first real friend and how long did that last? Why did that end?
- > Girlfriends? Longest relationship with the opposite sex? If no relationship is there any expressed interest in one? Any experience or talk about rejection from the opposite sex
- > TV Programs? What does he watch? Where? Does he record?
- > Do you watch programs together as a family?
- > Sports experience? (His experience and interests, how was he accepted by teammates)
- > Pets? Has he had any? Has he ever shown any cruelty towards animals?



# Interviewing Parents (Cont)

## ◎ WEAPON ACCESS AND EXPERIENCE

- > Any access to weapons? In the home? Access to cash/credit cards/financial instruments that can be used to purchase weapons.
- > Do they monitor his finances? Does he have his own ATM card or bank account? Credit card? How is it monitored.
- > Does he have a job? How is he paid—in cash?
- > What is his allowance per week? Are there chores associated with getting the money? Do you monitor how the money is spent/where it goes?
- > Does he have friends or relatives with access to weapons in the home or cash to help him acquire these?
- > Does he have a cell phone/text messaging devise/other communication device?
- > Who pays for it? Who gets the bill? Is he the only one with access to it?

# Interviewing Parents (Cont)

## ◎ SCHOOL HISTORY

- > Describe school experience year to year from kindergarten to present? Academic progress/history?
- > Disciplinary history?
- > Special education history?

# Interviewing Parents (Cont)

## ◎ **BULLYING/PEER VICTIMIZATION**

- Did he/she ever report perpetrating bullying behavior
- Did he/she ever report been a victim of bullying behavior
- What age/grade did he first report this
- Single event or ongoing (if single event-when, if ongoing-how long)
- Who if anyone was present, or witnessed the bullying
- Who did they tell/report it to
- Did they feel heard by this person
- Have they changed their behavior in any way to avoid being bullied

# Interviewing Parents (Cont)

## ◎ **MENTAL HEALTH HISTORY/PAST AND CURRENT**

- > **Depression?** When was the first time you either recognized or he said he was depressed?
- > What is the longest he has ever been depressed consecutively and what triggered it?
- > When was the last time he was depressed, what triggered it and how long did it last?
- > **Suicidal/homicidal ideation?**
- > Any suicide attempts? (How, where was the student, what triggered it, why was it not successful, who discovered the student)
- > Anxiety? When was the last time he said he was anxious or you recognized it?
- > What has been the longest he has been anxious consecutively and what triggered it?
- > When was the last time he was anxious, what triggered it and how long did it last?

# Interviewing Parents (Cont)

## ◎ **MEDICATION HISTORY**

- > What medications has he been on? When was he put on it? For what?
- > Who prescribed it? What were the symptoms? Was it effective? How?



## ◎ **TREATMENT HISTORY**

- > What was the treatment? Modality? When, how long, why, was it effective?
- > Any history of hospitalization? When, why, how long, was it effective?

# Interviewing Parents (Cont)

## ◎ **SUBSTANCE ABUSE HISTORY**

- > Alcohol
- > Cannabis
- > Cigarettes
- > Any designer drugs
- > Prescription drugs
- > OTC (Robitussin-“ Robo- tripping”)

# Interviewing Parents (Cont)

- ◉ **CURRENT STRESSORS**
- ◉ **LOSSES/RECENT AND PAST**
- ◉ **ADJUSTMENT TO A NEW MOVE/SCHOOL**
- ◉ **HISTORY OF FIRESETTING?**
- ◉ **HISTORY OF VICTIMIZING YOUNGER CHILDREN**
- ◉ **HISTORY OF BEING VICTIMIZED**



# Let's look at an actual assessment